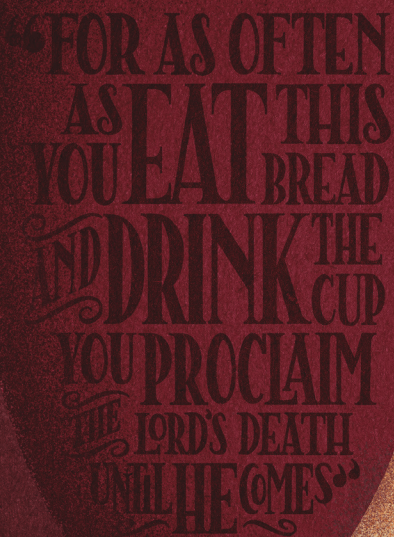


THE LORD'S SUPPER

ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS



“FOR AS OFTEN
AS YOU EAT THIS
BREAD
AND DRINK THE
CUP
YOU PROCLAIM
THE LORD'S DEATH
UNTIL HE COMES.”



1
CORINTHIANS
11:26

KEITH A. MATHISON

Endorsements

“The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper has been one of the more hotly contested topics in church history, so people in the church undoubtedly have questions about it. Dr. Keith Mathison presents a clear and biblical explanation of the Lord’s Supper that will surely help people in the church to have a deeper understanding of the sacrament. He provides food for thought that both instructs and reminds us why the Lord’s Supper is such a blessing for the church.”

—DR. J.V. FESKO

Professor of systematic and historical theology
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.

“This is an excellent introduction to the Lord’s Supper. Dr. Keith Mathison unfolds the biblical teaching, answers a range of common questions, and provides wise counsel on practical matters, including the relationship of young children to the communion service. The Reformed churches have historically attested that the supper is a means of grace. Since it is *the Lord’s* Supper and in it Christ gives Himself to feed and nourish us, and because it is a proclamation of His death and communion by the Holy Spirit in His ascended humanity, it is essential to the life and vitality of the church and to its effective witness to the world. I hope that many will read Dr. Mathison’s presentation and that it will be instrumental in reinvigorating the church in the years to come.”

—DR. ROBERT LETHAM

Professor of systematic and historical theology
Union School of Theology, Oxford, England

“There are many books on the Lord’s Supper written by able theologians. Few address in a clear and practical way the many questions Christians have about it. Dr. Keith Mathison has answered these questions from a Reformed point of view in clear and concise language. Using church history, systematic theology, and especially biblical exegesis, Dr. Mathison shows the historical and biblical reasons for the way Reformed churches celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This book is useful not only for young Christians and new believers, but also for those who have attended church for years and have never really realized what is going on during the Lord’s Supper.”

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES

Vice president of Presbyterian Church of Brazil

Assistant pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Recife, Brazil

“Jesus appointed the Lord’s Supper so that we would better remember Him. The Lord’s Supper helps us understand the person and work of Jesus Christ and the way in which the whole of Scripture points to Christ. In the supper, believers may find refreshing streams of grace flowing from the Savior whom we meet there. In this brief and accessible book, Dr. Keith Mathison helps us better understand the Lord’s Supper. Addressing biblical, theological, historical, and practical questions relating to the supper with insight and simplicity, Dr. Mathison offers readers of all levels and backgrounds a clearer understanding of the supper—and of the Savior Himself.”

—DR. GUY PRENTISS WATERS

James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.

**THE
LORD'S
SUPPER**

THE LORD'S SUPPER

ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS

KEITH A. MATHISON

The Lord's Supper: Answers to Common Questions

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INTRODUCTION

The Lord granted me faith and repentance in the year after my graduation from high school. Not long afterward, I joined a small Baptist church along with some friends who had also recently come to faith in Christ. Since I had not grown up in any church, everything was new to me. I had a lot to learn, and I was eager to do so. I read and reread the Bible, and I asked the pastor one question after another. I also made every effort to be at church during any worship service.

One of the things I noticed that our church did every month or so was observe a ceremony at the end of the worship service. The pastor would announce that we were going to observe the Lord's Supper, and after he read some words from 1 Corinthians, the deacons would distribute some thin, white, miniature crackers. They were about a half-inch across and completely tasteless, but I did not question their use. After each of us had eaten one of these, the deacons would distribute trays containing little plastic cups halfway filled with grape juice. After we drank these, the worship service would end with a hymn and an altar call.

Why did we do these things, and what did they mean? I never thought to ask. Over time, the Lord's Supper simply

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became part of the routine. I didn't give it a second thought. It was just something we did every once in a while.

Many years later, after moving to a different state, I found myself sitting in the new members class of a Presbyterian church. The pastor, who was teaching the class, introduced us to some of the basics of Reformed theology and Presbyterian history. We discussed the doctrines of grace, church polity, and the duties and privileges of church membership. We also discussed the sacrament of baptism at great length. A number of people in the new members class had come from Baptist churches, so the pastor wanted to make sure we understood what the Presbyterian church believed about baptism and why.

I do not recall any of our class time being devoted to the subject of the Lord's Supper. Our only exposure to the Reformed doctrine of the supper was what we read on our own time in the copies of the Westminster Confession of Faith we had been given for the class. At the time, I was focused on trying to understand the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism (a traumatic concept for those coming out of the Baptist tradition), so the doctrine of the Lord's Supper took a back seat to other issues. Since the church's actual observance of the Lord's Supper was almost identical to what I had become accustomed to in the Baptist church, that sacrament simply remained part of the routine.

I have spoken with many Christians over the years, and I do not think my experience is terribly unusual. There are many Christians sitting in the pews of churches across this nation and around the world for whom the Lord's Supper has become

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part of the Christian routine. They partake faithfully, and they think about Jesus while they are partaking, but they do not really understand everything that is going on during the observance of the sacrament. They do not fully understand why the pastor says certain words at various points during the supper or what those words mean. They do not fully understand why the pastor performs certain actions during the supper or what those actions mean.

If they have visited other churches, they do not understand why one church does things in one way while another church does them a different way. Why does the pastor at one church break a single loaf of bread while the pastor at another church distributes trays of mini-crackers? Why does one church use grape juice while another church uses wine? Why does one church observe the Lord's Supper every week while another church observes it monthly or quarterly?

A cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals the danger of simply going through the motions in worship without any real understanding. Such uninformed worship practices lead to a dead and deadening ritualism. Christians are to observe the Lord's Supper, but they must do so with understanding and discernment. When we begin to understand what the Lord's Supper is and what it means, when we begin to understand what God is doing and what we are doing in this sacrament, it is no longer a tedious extra fifteen minutes to endure. Instead, it is a source of great blessing, something we look forward to with anticipation.

The purpose of this book is to help Christians better understand the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper in

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the Reformed tradition. It is structured around a number of the most frequently asked questions concerning the supper. I have attempted to answer these questions in the clearest way possible. It is my prayer that readers of this book will come away from it giving glory to God for the great blessing He has given His people in this sacrament.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Have you ever noticed the strangeness of the Lord's Supper? Many of us have been attending church for so many years that this thing we do every week or every month has become somewhat routine. Its strangeness no longer strikes us. But step back and imagine what it looks like to someone attending a church for the first time. Imagine what it looks like to a child. With some differences among churches in the details of the liturgy, the members of the church receive bread, which they eat in a ceremonial way after the pastor repeats the words of Jesus: "This is my body." Then they receive wine (or grape juice), which they ceremonially drink after the pastor repeats the words of Jesus: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." What in the world is going on here? What is the Lord's Supper?

Scripture anticipates that the sacraments instituted by God will raise questions among believers. When the Passover was instituted, for instance, Moses said, "And when your children

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say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses'" (Ex. 12:26–27). The Lord knew that the Passover would require explanation. He knew that Israelite children would wonder about the meaning of the rituals. We should expect nothing different when it comes to our children and the Lord's Supper. But do we know how to answer such questions? What do we say when our children ask, "What do you mean by this service?"

Christians in the Reformed tradition have studied Scripture extensively in order to answer such questions. The results of this study are found in the Reformed confessions and catechisms. The Westminster Larger Catechism, for example, provides a concise answer to the question, "What is the Lord's Supper?" "The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with the other, as members of the same mystical body" (WLC 168). This definition reveals how intertwined the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is with other Christian doctrines. In this catechism alone, there are 167 questions and answers before we get to the Lord's Supper, and much of what is taught in the earlier questions is assumed

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here. It is important, therefore, to know that our answer to the question, "What is the Lord's Supper?" cannot be understood in isolation from other Christian doctrines. It is not possible to fully grasp the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper without some understanding of the doctrines of God, Scripture, sin, salvation, the incarnation, the church, and more.¹

We see in the catechism's answer, for example, that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament. But that answer is not helpful if we do not have some idea of the nature of a sacrament. Additional problems arise because many who hear the word *sacrament* associate it with mysticism or ceremonialism. Some associate it with Roman Catholicism and cannot imagine why a Protestant church would continue to use such a loaded term. There is a fear that the use of the word might be allowing the camel's nose under the tent, and if the nose is there, the camel cannot be far behind.

This is one reason why the study of the Reformation and the confessions of the Reformation can be incredibly helpful. The Reformers had no fear of the word *sacrament* and no qualms about its continued use, and they, better than anyone today, knew the dangers of late-medieval Roman Catholicism. In addition, the Reformed churches of the following generations had no fear of the word. Almost every sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confession has a chapter titled "On the Sacraments," and Reformed theologians have used the word for centuries. As long as we define it carefully, it is a perfectly appropriate word.

How, then, is the word *sacrament* defined? The Westminster

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Larger Catechism is again helpful, explaining that a sacrament is “a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without” (WLC 162). The catechism goes on to explain that sacraments have two parts: a visible outward sign and the spiritual reality signified by the sign (WLC 163). Reformed churches teach that there are only two such sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ under the new covenant: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of the New Testament or new covenant, instituted by Jesus Christ in the upper room on the night on which He was betrayed (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–23; 1 Cor. 11:23–26). Because it is a sacrament, the Lord’s Supper signifies, seals, and exhibits to believing partakers “the benefits of his [Christ’s] mediation.” It also strengthens and increases our faith and obliges us to obedience. It declares our love for and communion with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Finally, as a sacrament, the supper distinguishes those in the church from unbelievers.

What do we mean when we say that the Lord’s Supper signifies, seals, and exhibits the benefits of Christ’s mediation? Let us look first at the word *signifies*. Sacraments have two parts: a visible outward sign and the reality signified by that sign. In the Lord’s Supper, the visible outward sign is the giving and receiving of bread and wine. The bread and wine signify Christ

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crucified and His benefits (WCF 29.5, 7). More specifically, the bread is the sign of Christ's body, and the wine is the sign of His blood (Matt. 26:26–28; 1 Cor. 10:16). In our day, when we hear the word *sign*, we often think of a road sign that conveys information or a symbol such as the pound sign (#, now more often known as a hashtag). This is not exactly what is meant when we refer to the bread and wine as signs of the body and blood of Christ crucified, because in the Lord's Supper there is “a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified” (WCF 27.2). Because of the sacramental union, a sacramental sign is distinguished from that which it signifies, but it is not separated from it. We will return to this idea of sacramental union repeatedly, so it is important to keep it in mind.

What does it mean to say that the Lord's Supper “seals” the benefits of Christ's mediation? Paul, in Romans 4:11, speaks of Abraham's circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” The context indicates that circumcision was a seal in the sense that it confirmed the reality of the thing signified, namely, the righteousness Abraham had by faith. Circumcision authenticated it. Similarly, the Lord's Supper is a seal in the sense that it confirms and authenticates the promise of God regarding the reality of the benefits received by those who partake of the supper in faith. It indicates that the supper is no mere empty ceremony. Those who partake in faith are assured that they actually do “feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and

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communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with the other, as members of the same mystical body” (WLC 168).

Finally, what is meant by the word *exhibits*? What does it mean to say that the Lord’s Supper exhibits the benefits of Christ’s mediation? Again, the Westminster Confession provides a helpful place to begin thinking through the answer to this question: “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers” (WCF 27.3). To exhibit is to hold forth. The benefits of Christ are actually held forth to believers in this sacrament. The confession here explains what this does not mean. To say that the supper exhibits the benefits of Christ’s mediation does *not* mean that the bread and wine have any power in and of themselves. Furthermore, the exhibition of the benefits does not depend on the holiness or intent of the minister. It depends solely on the work of the Spirit and the promise of God found in the words of institution.

What, then, are the actual benefits? What actually does happen by the power of the Holy Spirit according to the promise of God? The Westminster Confession states: “Worthy receivers outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not

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carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses" (WCF 29.7). We will address some of the questions that this raises in later chapters. At this point, we simply note that in the Lord's Supper, there is more going on than meets the eye. The confession points out a parallel between what is happening "outwardly" and what is happening "inwardly."

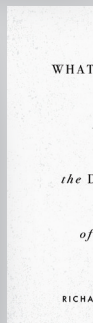
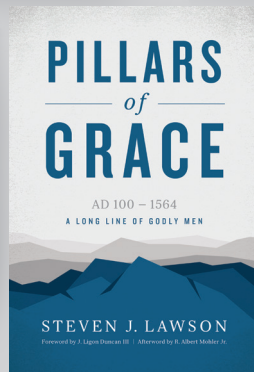
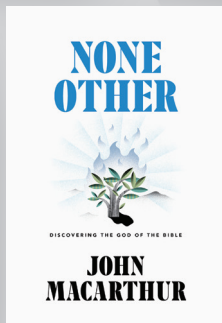
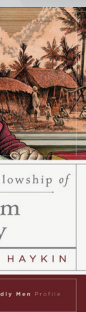
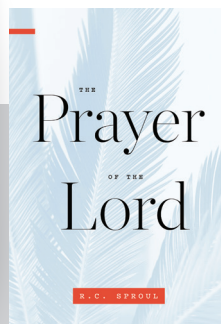
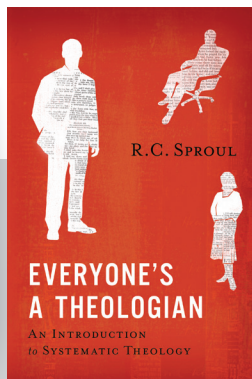
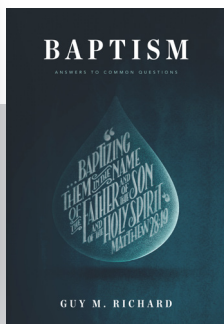
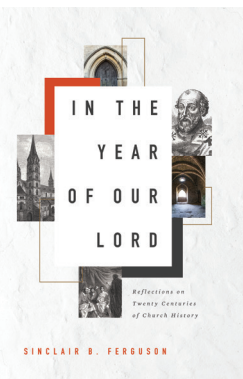
It is worth examining the main clauses before looking at the qualifying clauses lest we miss the main points. According to the confession, worthy partakers, namely, those with faith, who partake of the visible elements (bread and wine) "really and indeed . . . receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death." The "body and blood of Christ" are present "to the faith of believers" as the elements of bread and wine are present "to their outward senses." The outward-inward distinction continues throughout the entire paragraph.

Clearly, the confession makes the point that this is not to be understood in some crass materialistic sense. Believers really and indeed "receive and feed upon Christ crucified" but not "carnally or corporally." This happens spiritually because the body and blood of Christ are present to the faith of believers rather than corporally or carnally present "in, with, or under the bread and wine." As the Westminster Larger Catechism puts it, "They that worthily communicate in the sacrament of

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the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death" (WLC 170).

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“DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

As Jesus was celebrating His final Passover meal, He made some bold statements. First, He took the bread and said, “This is my body.” Then He took the cup, saying, “This is my blood.” Next, He commanded the disciples to eat and drink in remembrance of Him.

What did Jesus mean? Do the bread and wine literally become His body and blood? What happens when Christians take the Lord’s Supper?

In *The Lord’s Supper: Answers to Common Questions*, Dr. Keith A. Mathison walks through these questions and several others to help us better understand this sacrament. Far from being an empty ritual, the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace, a source of spiritual nourishment, and true communion with Christ and His church.

Dr. Keith A. Mathison is professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla. He is author of several books, including *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* and *From Age to Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*.



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